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MANAGEMENT PERSPECTIVES

Self-Management

From the Editor

Every occupation seems to have a set of maxims worth knowing and following. Carpenters know to measure twice and cut once. Firefighters always look for a way out. Chefs understand the value of *mise en place*.

Leaders and managers follow maxims that also encourage anticipation, focus, and planning:

Read your world.
Go where your customers are.
Begin with the end in mind.
Importancy comes before urgency.
Do first things first.
Plan your work and then work your plan.

... to name a few.

Part of our job at LIVE Consultants is to remind organizations and the people in them of the maxims of prosperity and success ... and ensure they are part of how business gets done.

Marilyn Baetz, editor

About the Author and the Article

Stories have the ability to illuminate and guide. They can just as easily delude and limit. The responsibility we have, therefore, is to choose wisely the stories that we tell ourselves.

Stephen defines eight of the more dysfunctional stories individuals tell themselves and points out what he sees as more accurate.

His premise is that if we can recognize these stories we can change them to a life-script which is more functional, indeed, more health-full for the individual and the organization.

Stephen Baetz is a principal of LIVE Consultants Inc., the organization sponsoring this publication.



Stephen Baetz

Telling Stories

In the past few months I have had the opportunity to listen to some speakers at conferences and conventions. For the most part, they've got me thinking about issues in a much different way. Those experiences have reminded me that well chosen words, rich metaphors, and insightful examples have the ability to change my mind.

And yes, I have endured speakers who were, well, dreadful. They either misread the audience, talked down, or mumbled a mundane mantra that meant nothing to those of us on the other side of the podium.

It's at times like these that I found myself searching for a form of amusement that will get me through. The game — I guess in all honesty that's what it is — I often resort to is counting the number of verbal crutches per minute: the number of ah's, you knows, rights, or you-know-what-I-means. I realize this is not usually a productive investment of my time; it would be much better to search for the meaning that was intended or ask myself whether I agree with the speaker's assumptions. The last time I did this, however, a self-reflection did occur, quite by accident. I began to wonder what phrases, jargon, or over-used words I use when communicating with others. The list was short: okay, I'll be more precise ... I couldn't list any. Not because I don't use them but because I don't have enough objectivity to see them.

Until. Until about a week ago when a colleague said to me "You like that phrase."

"What phrase?"

"Stories we tell ourselves," he said. "You used it the last time we were talking and the time before that, and ..."

My face must have registered an ugh. He was right.

"Don't fret," he offered. "I like it. We all tell ourselves stories to reinforce our view of the world: sometimes the stories are true, mostly not." Which got me thinking that I should be more precise and define what "stories" people often tell themselves that aren't accurate, maybe even delusional, and what I see as being more accurate. I invite you to test these against your experience.

Story 1: There's nothing I can say that will make a difference.

The premise seems to be that others have made up their minds and that they won't change them.

This storyline often moves to a conclusion that "the best thing I can do is follow the path that has been mapped out by somebody else, even if I know it's unproductive." However, my observation is that most individuals will alter their point of view *if* they are given solid reasons or benefits that they value and *if* it is done in a way that can be heard.

Story 2: If you speak up, you'll be fired.

This story is a gloomy one often told with knowing glances that imply that there is a lengthy list of people who have been victimized for being vocal.

When I ask people within organizations for real evidence the response is often, "Well, maybe not fired but *things* are made difficult." My experience has been that people who speak up — with clear ideas and suggestions — often get recognized and are given additional challenges and even promoted. Most senior managers I know have personal examples of when they took risks and offered another way of doing things.

Story 3: They must know what they're doing.

I often hear this story around strategy. Perhaps it evolves because leaders cloister themselves in retreat settings to set the strategic direction — coming out of planning meetings, leaders should have it all sorted out.

The truth, as I have experienced it, is that leaders have some sense of what the appropriate direction is but they don't have it all figured out. In fact, the feeling is often more of we-think-this-is-the-right-direction-let's-test-it-and-experience-will-tell-us.

Leaders depend on everybody to help figure it out and define what ought to be done.

Story 4: They don't think I've got another life.

This storyline is frequently told with chapter and verse examples of how “they” have sacrificed so much and don't have another life outside of work. And then in whispered tones, “They expect me to do the same.”

The truth that I've seen is that leaders worry and fret about whether the workload is fair and whether others on the team have balance in their lives.

Most of the best leaders I work with have balance in their lives, work hard at making relationships work, participate in community activities, and know they are better for it. A life outside of work charges the batteries and more often than not, they understand what really matters and what doesn't.

Story 5: They don't want me to think.

This story originates with the perception that doing is more valued than thinking. And this story has been reinforced by an almost slavish commitment in the last decade to defining processes and flawlessly executing them. If that's the case, it would be easy to conclude that all that's needed is an ability to follow the steps without deviation — to just do what has been prescribed.

However, what leaders bemoan is a lack of judgement, common sense, problem solving capacities, and logic. They fear that their organization doesn't have thinkers who can see relationships, make connections, and figure things out. When they find it, they reward and recognize it by giving those individuals projects, special assignments, and complex, thorny problems to resolve.

Story 6: That's not like me.

This story gets told when somebody is asked to do a task or take on a set of responsibilities, even behaviours, that they haven't imagined themselves being capable of doing. “Make a presentation to a team of Directors? Oh that's

not like me.” “Be more assertive when dealing with a supplier? Oh, that's not like me.” “Speak up more in meetings? Oh, that's not like me.” The underlying assumption appears to be that at some point in our life our personality and skill sets got locked in and there's no way change is possible.

By contrast, I've seen myself and others do many things that, at first blush, seemed out of character. When that happens, people not only surprise themselves but they get the attention of others who recognize the courage it took to try something new.

Story 7: People who have titles are the people with the power.

The companion story is that those at the top of the hierarchy have more power than those at the bottom. This story, like some of the others, has a bit of truth attached to it. Yes, position does have power. That can't be denied. However, not everybody with a title is powerful and not everyone who doesn't have a title is without power.

Power is connected to competence, energy, enthusiasm, focus, knowledge, ability to build relationships, and so on. None of those power bases are confined to position and status. All of us have access to power and, with it, the ability to move teams and issues forward.

Story 8: They don't appreciate quality work.

This story is told after an individual has put a lot of time and effort into producing an exceptional product. The final line to the story often is, “I'm throwing pearls to swine.” Like the last story, there is a bit of truth — recognition doesn't happen as often as we'd like it to ... maybe because people are busy, maybe because they don't know what effort was put in, maybe because expressing appreciation is difficult for some people ... who knows.

My observation is that quality is recognized and valued. More often than not, people who do quality work are given expanded responsibilities and new opportunities.

Let's Stop Training And Let's Start Educating

Ever wonder why senior management views trainers as mechanics and the classroom as the service department where you send people to be fixed?

Senior executives didn't get that impression on their own.

Somehow or other that impression is there because our profession has helped to create it. Training has been used all too often as a quick fix. "Not performing? Let's send them on this training program, give them some basic skills, and see if it makes a difference."

It won't.

We owe it to our organizations to provide people with an education and get out of the quick-fix business. Education improves the quality of the organization's intellectual capital by not only building skills but also by building knowledge and the supporting attitudes. Education is a longer-term developmental process which helps people understand context and constraint. Education focuses as much on how to think as what to do. Besides, if the truth were told, most current performance problems are best addressed by the immediate manager on a one-to-one basis with specific coaching, support, and follow-up — not by mere classroom input and practice.

If our business is education, then a long-term development process should be what we offer and promise. To do that, we should

- be thoughtful about what attitudes, skills, and knowledge we help managers to learn,
- develop a variety of learning experiences — inside and outside the classroom — that complement one another,
- measure what contribution we are making to learning, and
- refuse to offer quick fixes.

If you would like some help in figuring out how you can best carry out the development work of an educator, please call us.

For more information about our services, contact us at (519) 664-2213.